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A Doctoral Resume

Unconventional Journeys of Disabled Women:

A study of select Autobiographies

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Introduction:

Genesis of Autobiography writing :

Derived from the three Greek words, 'autos','bios' and 'self', autobiography means writing of the self. Smith and Watson quote the famous critic Misch to state the definition of autobiography, "The description (*graphia*) of an individual human life (*bios*) by the individual himself (*autos*)". Chloe Thurlow quoted "Autobiography is a precious broken vase pieced painstakingly together still showing the chips and cracks. It is a broken truth revealing snapshots of a cracked and chipped life pieced painstakingly together."

Yet autobiography was not classified as a genre within itself until the late eighteenth century.

In ancient times,such works were typically entitled apologia. John Henry Newman's '*Apologia Pro Vita Sua*' , Augustines' '*Confessions*' and Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote one of the first autobiographies, initiating the chain of confessional and highly self-critical autobiographies of the Romantic era and beyond.

In the 15th century, Leonor López de Córdoba, a Spanish noblewoman, wrote her *Memorias*. Zāhir ud-Dīn Mohammad Bābur of the Mughal dynasty kept a journal named *Bāburnāma*. One of the first great autobiographies of the Renaissance period was *Vita* written by Benvenuto Cellini.

The earliest known autobiography written in English is the Book of Margery Kempe written in 1438. Other notable English autobiographies of the 17th century include those of Lord Herbert of Cherbury and John Bunyan (*Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*).

In the 18th and 19th centuries,with the rise of education, newspapers and cheap printing, autobiographies of popular people became famous. Not only writers such as Charles Dickens but also politicians (e.g. Henry Brooks Adams), philosophers (e.g. John Stuart Mill), churchmen such as Cardinal Newman, and entertainers such as P. T. Barnum wrote their autobiographies.

In the 20th and 21st centuries, Autobiography has become an increasingly popular and widely accessible form. Since then autobiographies of various sects of society, from varied personalities with emphasis on Dalits, feminists , discrimination based on color and many more have been published and widely distributed. Hence, it has been observed that autobiographies as well as their studies till recent times have been centred in and around mainstream topics. The area of autobiographies on disabilities

and its further studies remains to be relatively undiscovered compared to themes of racial,ethnic and other oppressed minority groups.

Notion of disability

The definition of disability has evolved over time and branched into various models based on varied perspectives. In the mediaeval era, disability was considered a punishment from God for one's sin or misbehaviour or that of one's ancestors. Henderson and Bryan (2011) quote about this religious model:

> Some people, if not many, believe that some disabilities are the result of lack of adherence to social morality and religious proclamations that warn against engaging in certain behaviour. To further explain this model, some beliefs are based upon the assumption that some disabilities are the result of punishment from an all-powerful entity. Furthermore, the belief is that the punishment is for an act or acts of transgression against prevailing moral and/or religious edicts.

Disability was seen as a flaw or imperfection of the individual. As a result of the myths about disability, people with disabilities were often stigmatised. Children and adults with severe disabilities were isolated and often denied education, care, employment, and shunned from the family as well as society. They were left in the lurch and condemned.

Medically, the Centres for disease Control and Prevention(CDC) defines disability as:

> "A disability is any condition of the body or mind (impairment) that makes it more difficult for the person with the condition to do certain activities (activity limitation) and interact with the world around them (participation restrictions)."

According to the social model, disability originates from society and not within the person. Disability is a restricted activity caused by social barriers. It is a form of social oppression created by categorising bodies/minds as normal or abnormal.

Survey and development of disability literature:

Literature by disabled persons was remarkably deficient until early 1980. A British anthology edited by Jo Campling (1981) containing the writings of 23 women with disabilities describing their lives and experiences of being female and having a

disability was published. The journal *'Off Our Backs*' devoted a whole issue to women with disabilities and later the same year the Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare published an issue devoted to the theme '*Women and disability: The double handicap*'.

In 1983, Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness also devoted a special issue to visual impairment and disability . In 1985, the first major collection of scholarly writings about women with disabilities was published (Deegan & Brooks, 1985). This volume highlights the double minority status of women with disabilities, ignorance about their lives and experiences, and the necessity for positive change in social spheres.

In 1988, a second edited volume of scholarly writings about women with disabilities was published with Fine, Michele, Asch, Adrienne. Ed. publishing essays. *Disabled, Female, and Proud!*(1988), a book about stories of ten women with disabilities offering ideas about work, relationships and lifestyles, and examining the ways they have fought the prejudices of gender and disability. The incidents of sexual abuse of women and children with mental retardation was documented in Canada in 1988 (Senn, 1988).

The 1989, Diane O'reilly wrote his autobiography titled *'Retard*' on his experiences with mental retardation. In the same year, Christopher Nolan documented his ordeal with Cerebral Palsy in his autobiography titled '*Under the eye of the clock-the life story of Christopher Nolan*'. The last decade of the nineteenth century saw noticeable disability narratives by Hellen Keller- '*Story of my Life*'(1990), Lucy Grealy'- '*Autobiography of a face* ' (1994) , Jean Dominique-Bauby- '*The diving bell and the butterfly'*(1998) and Malini Chib '*One Little finger*' (1999).

With the advent of digital platforms, the last few years saw a plethora of writers from varied backgrounds, ethnicities, gender accounting their life stories in books perpetuating motivation and strength for all. Some of these include, *Born Again on the Mountain: A Story of Losing Everything and Finding It Bac*k by Arunima Sinha, *Sitting Pretty: The View from My Ordinary Resilient Disabled Body by Rebekah Taussig*, *Girl With Wings On Fire* by Dr. Divya Singh, *The World I Fell into: What Breaking My Neck Taught Me About Life* by Melanie Reid, *Wheelchair Doctor* by Dorothy Clark Wilson ,*The Other Senses: An Inspiring True Story of a Visually Impaired* by Preeti Monga, *No Looking Back a True Story* by Shivani Gupta, *Being Heumann: An Unrepentant Memoir of a Disability Rights Activist* by Judith Heumann , *Haben: The Deafblind Woman Who Conquered Harvard Law* by Haben Girma.

Objectives of the research

Gender discrimination is prevalent in various ethnic cultures worldwide since ages.Women suffer most of the negative impact of rigid gender norms and roles due to varying expectations and presumptions of what they are supposed to do. They bear the

brunt of restrictions in freedom, mobility,unequal pay and fewer opportunities. They sustain violence and harassment and are prevented from fulfilling their goals and dreams. Women with disabilities are further subject to a dual disadvantage based on bias based on gender as well as prejudice based on disabilit*y. D. Das and S.B. Agnihotri,* in the paper "*Physical Disability: Is There a Gender Dimension?*" examine the statistical evidence of the incidence of physical disability in India and prove the extent of higher bias to women with disability.

Hence, through the present research an attempt will be made to investigate the autobiographical narratives of disabled women with the following objectives:

- To study the narratives with respect to the impact of gender on disability.
- To investigate the selected works on their unconventional journeys through the lens of narrative identity
- To analyse the articulation of self in select autobiographies.
- To study the elements of disparity, social oppression, stigma in select autobiographies.
- To study how the disabled women lead a fulfilling and enriching life despite all hurdles and display exemplary courage and valour.
- To create empathy rather than sympathy about disabled women and view them with honour and respect, giving them the social standing that they deserve .

Hypothesis of research:

The researcher proposes the following hypotheses :

- There exists a correlation between gender and disability where disabled women are exposed to a higher bias and prejudice
- Indian disabled autobiography writings in English are trying to match up with the international trends in literature.
- Indian disabled autobiography writers are successfully handling the genre, they are not behind.
- There exist diverse and differing medical, socio-cultural conditions between the disabled women in India and in America.

Research methodology:

The research methodology of this work will be exploratory, interpretative, evaluative and analytical. The extensive analysis of the selected texts will be carried out to study the unconventional journeys.In the present research, MLA documentation style

of parenthetical citation in the text and alphabetical list of works at the end of the chapter i.e. in select Bibliography will be adopted.

Importance of the study:

The present research is significant in the following ways:

- The domain of autobiographies has been extensively studied in the past in all aspects and dimensions. Studies of women autobiographies where their ordeals have been portrayed in varied lights have gained momentum only in recent times. Moreover, autobiographical writings by disabled women have been relatively unexplored. The present research hence gains importance, in lieu of an endeavour to explore, study, analyse these writings and bring them forward into the world.
- It is of significance that disabled women writings and research is brought to centre stage and explored extensively.
- Autobiographies by disabled women provide us a dual perspective on the bias they face based on gender and disability. They provide an insight into their sufferings, lack of facilities and development of identity. In view of disability rights movements, this would give a stance and outlook.
- Disability literature serves as inspiration and motivation for all, especially in the post pandemic world where people have been afflicted with a great deal of agony, grief and sorrow resulting in a drastic change in human life worldwide.

Tentative chapter scheme

The thesis will be divided into five chapters. These are as follows -

Chapter-I- Introduction

It will take a detailed survey of autobiography as a form of English literature. It would delve deep into the concept of disability ,its dimensions and its models. A review of available literature by disabled women writers would also be done with special emphasis on autobiographies.

Chapter-II- Study of 'Story of my Life' by Hellen Keller

Hellen Keller is regarded as the advocate for people with disabilities.

This autobiography was written during Hellens' time at Radcliffe College and published when she was 22 years old. It is an honest account of unwavering determination and perseverance reflecting the seemingly ordinary achievements of an extraordinary woman, serving as an inspirational tale of success.

This autobiography consists of three sections:

The first is an account of Helen's life up to age 21 covering all of her major life events.The second part of the book is a collection of letters Helen wrote over the course of her life, showing significant development in her communication abilities as time goes on. The final part is commentary by the book's editor, with advice from Miss Sullivan, remarking on various parts of Helen's life experience as detailed in this autobiography.

This chapter would hence deal with the critical study of the autobiography and its exploration in the direction of her unconventional journey ,narrative identity, element of gender and trace the issues reflected in the book. The researcher will study the book meticulously in order to bring out the elements of agony, distress and self identity in terms of the book.

Chapter-III- Critical analysis of 'Autobiography of a Face' by Lucy Grealy

Autobiography of a Face is a 1994 memoir written by award-winning poet Lucy Grealy describing her childhood struggles with jaw cancer and the resulting disfigurement.

This chapter would deal with the critical study of the memoir and would explore her encounters and experiences with cancer and its treatment. The issues reflected in the book are in contrast with the conventional ideas of disability being limited only to physical aspects. The author has multiple plastic surgeries in an attempt to overcome her disability and regain normal physical appearance. This aspect would be thoroughly explored.

The researcher will study the book rigorously in order to bring out the elements of grief, sorrow and development of self identity in terms of the book.

Chapter-IV- Review of 'One Little finger' by Malini Chib

This chapter would go over the critical study of the autobiography and traverse her hardships in life, her pioneering work as a disability rights activist bringing not only awareness about cerebral palsy but also doing ground level work by building infrastructure and developing facilities for the disabled.

The researcher will study the book diligently in order to bring out the elements of self identity in terms of the book.

Chapter-V- Conclusion

This chapter will be a summary and conclude the discussion of the books under study. It will reassess the entire study and analyse the outcome of this entire research work.

The present Synopsis is merely an outline of research work. The changes may be inevitable in the chapter scheme or concerned study during the research work.

Scope of Research:

The present research work will include only three autobiographies from the disability literature. These are:

- Lucy Grealy: Autobiography of a Face (1994)
- Hellen Keller: Story of My Life (1990)
- Malini Chib: One little finger (1999)

The research problem would hence be investigated and analysed in consideration with the above three works only. The objectives of studying unconventional journeys, impact of gender on disability, and other elements like stigma,social oppression would be studied. The study aims to create awareness about disability and its ordeals and hopes that disabled women are regarded with empathy rather than sympathy and they get the social standing that they deserve.

Limitations of Research:

As far as the present research work is concerned, it would be centric to the above listed three autobiographies. It would neither embrace other autobiographies from literature nor the writers from the said literature. Other works are hence excluded from the study.

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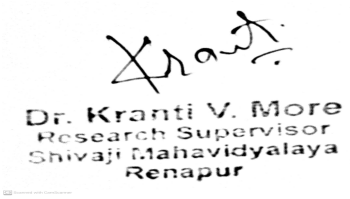

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